New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1952

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1952 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1951 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Antony and Cleopatra	132
Bagels and Yox	238
Caesar and Cleopatra	135
Constant Wife (The)	149
*Don Juan in Hell	193
*Fourposter (The)	190
*Gigi	159
Glad Tidings	212
*I Am a Camera	156
*King and I (The)	304
Legend of Lovers	125
Lo and Behold!	143
*Moon Is Blue (The)	322
Nina	152
Number (The)	186
*Paint Your Wagon	172
*Point of No Return	140
Remains To Be Seen	223
Saint Joan	220
*Stalag 17	274
*Top Banana	180
Two on the Aisle	246
Wild Duck (The)	128

1950 Vol.

Affairs of State	267
*Call Me Madam	243
*Guys and Dolls	185

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

1948 Vol.

Kiss Me, Kate (return engagement)	91

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of April 21, 1952*

1952 PRODUCTIONS
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play Premieres During 1952	*Page*
Anna Christie	395
Brass Ring (The)	319
"Charles Dickens"	371
*Chase (The)	315
Collector's Item	368
Come of Age	382
Dear Barbarians	356
Desire Under the Elms	386
Fancy Meeting You Again	392
Flight Into Egypt	341
*Four Saints in Three Acts	312
Gertie	379
*Golden Boy	344
*Grass Harp (The)	328
*Jane	376
Long Watch (The)	335
*Mrs. McThing	359
One Bright Day	338
*Pal Joey	398
*Paris '90	348
*Shrike (The)	389
*Three Wishes for Jamie	332
*Venus Observed	364
Women of Twilight	351
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD	322

Theatre Openings

"The Chase"
"The Brass Ring"
"Four Saints in Three Acts"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of April 21, 1952*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Four Saints in Three Acts"

The New York Times

April 17, 1952

'Four Saints in Three Acts' Restaged by ANTA at the Broadway Theatre

By BROOKS ATKINSON

People in search of an explanation of "Four Saints in Three Acts" had better not look to this column. For these comments are written by one theatregoer who is just as puzzled by the performance that opened at the Broadway last evening as he was in 1934, when the opera by Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein opened originally.

The music, written for the most part in religious style, is gravely beautiful; some of it is magnificent, like a mass. The singing and acting have a moving sincerity and simplicity. And the staging—some by Mr. Thomson and some by Maurice Grosser—is extraordinarily inventive and pictorial. If memory serves, Paul Morrison's scenery and costumes have lost some of the flashing splendor of the originals. But the Valentine motives, the delicate filigree, the candy-box colors are imaginative and disarming. No one who has seen and heard this curious opera will ever forget the evanescent impressions it leaves on the senses.

* * *

But there is no use pretending that Miss Stein's libretto, written in a form of sensuous gibberish, is equal to the music and the occasion. And the fact that "Four Saints in Three Acts" has no articulate theme leaves the whole work without a literary structure and with a feeling of aimlessness. Although the music is full of grand harmonies that communicate a sense of religious experience and the stage pictures are constantly changing, the emotional values of the work are repetitious and desultory. There is no life at the core; nothing is fulfilled in this panorama of talent, beauty and skill. It is the apotheosis of sophistication—style and manner without content.

* * *

Like modern art, it is satisfied with technique. It shows you how art is put together, but it has nothing to contribute of its own. It portrays some reverent figures engaged in religious ritual, but it has no convictions about them. Again, it is the height of sophistication in art; and this may be why it is so admirable in form and style and so unsatisfying in content.

Miss Stein was a warm-hearted, independent woman with, apparently, a great love for the spectacle of life; and she could be terrifyingly articulate when she wanted to be. Among other things, she loved the sound and savor of words. The libretto for "Four Saints in Three Acts" represents her delight in agreeable sounds. But it leaves the opera sprawling and maundering through a bright world of images; and it shows how close sophistication comes to naivete.

No doubt Mr. Thomson's score is generalized, too. But it has forms that are intelligible out of traditional church music, perfect for choruses and orchestra alike. Since everybody in the cast is a saint of one category or another this column is unable to identify the individual singers. But Edward Matthews repeats his original performance as a wholly dedicated St. Ignatius, and so does Inez Matthews as St. Theresa I. Since there are only two St. Theresas, it is possible to identify Betty Lou Allen as the other and to express a word of thanks for her devout singing. By a stroke of good fortune, and some help from the neighbors, Rayfield du Bard can also be identified as St. Vincent. He's good.

* * *

In the music, the singing, the staging and décor, "Four Saints in Three Acts" contains much that is lovely and some that is expressed with genuine humility. Miss Stein's libretto, which sounds like pig-Latin, is completely outclassed by the rest of the work. Mr. Thomson and his associates in the production deserve a libretto as interesting as the work they have done.

"FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS"

Opera with music by Virgil Thomson; libretto by Gertrude Stein; artistic and musical direction by Mr. Thomson; scenery and costumes by Paul Morrison based on designs by Florine Stettheimer; choreography by William Dollar; book directed by Maurice Grosser; managing director, Robert Whitehead; revived by the American National Theatre and Academy in association with Ethel Linder at the Broadway Theatre, April 16, 1952. The cast:

St. Stephen.....Clyde Turner
St. Settlement...Martha Flowers
St. Plan.....Calvin Dash
St. Sara.....Doris Mayes
Commere.....Altonell Hines
Compere.....Elwood Smith
St. Theresa I....Inez Matthews
St. Theresa II..Betty Lou Allen
St. Ignatius...Edward Matthews
St. Cecelia.....Leontyne Price
St. Electra.....Ida Johnson
St. Jan.....George Goodman
St. Chavez.....Rawn Spearman
St. Eustace....Charles Coleman
St. Vincent.....Raphael du Bard

New York Post

April 17, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Revival of an Enchanting Opera

There are people who are outraged by the very thought of "Four Saints in Three Acts," and I think it is incredibly stuffy of them. They say that the celebrated opera by Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein is a shameless hoax on a gullible public, and they may be right, but, if so, it is certainly a most delightful one. I was enthusiastic about it when it was first produced in New York in 1934, and last night, when it was revived at the Broadway Theater as the latest item in Robert Whitehead's successful ANTA season, my admiration was as great as ever. It is wonderful fun if you don't get serious-minded about it.

I suppose it is true that you will get out of "Four Saints in Three Acts" just about what you bring to it. If you insist on taking it gravely and trying to probe its cryptic meaning, I have no doubt that you will find it silly, pretentious and annoying. But if you accept it on its own terms, as a gay, prankish, joyously mannered musical adventure in humor, beauty and imagination, I think you will find it a thoroughgoing delight, bright, hilarious, original, oddly charming and possessing one of the most enchanting of modern scores. It never thinks of taking itself seriously, and there is no reason why you should.

Music and Lyrics

It may be true that Miss Stein was laughing at her audience, but the proper reply to make is to laugh right back at her. Among other things, the old girl could be a very fine humorist. Although the lyrics are at least as sensible as those of most of the current popular songs, they are obviously more notable for their nonsense than for any literal meaning. But they are quite wonderful nonsense, and they have the added advantage that they fit in so charmingly with Mr. Thomson's fascinating music. And the brilliant composer-critic's score achieves the great feat of being at once humorous, witty and lovely.

If it happens that you don't like the work of Miss Stein and Mr. Thomson, you can't say that I—and they—haven't warned you. They have written an opera called "Four Saints in Three Acts" which has 13 saints in the cast—if you count St. Theresa as two saints, as Miss Stein does—and consists of four acts and a prologue. The first act is described as "Avila: St. Theresa half indoors and half out of doors" and the second as "Might it be Mountains if it were not Barcelona," which should provide an additional idea. Then, there is the famous lyric line that goes "pigeons on the grass, alas."

If you say it was all intended as a joke, I am certainly in no position to dispute you, but there is considerably more to "Four Saints" than its humor and high spirits. There is also a strange and imaginative beauty and grace about it. As I have said, Mr. Thomson has written a brilliant score, but it is likewise a remarkably melodious one. As mannered and perverse as Miss Stein's "book" may be, it also captures moments of curiously innocent sweetness. The evening is enormously aided, too, by the gay and colorful cellophane sets and costumes which give a fairy-tale lightness to the entire production.

One of the major causes of the opera's rare charm is the presence of its fine Negro cast. As much as I like "Four Saints," I must grant that it might seem a little pretentious in its prankishness if the singers didn't bring to it, in addition to their splendid voices, such personal dignity, simplicity and ease. The almost casual dances add vastly to its oddly engaging beauty. All of the performers have a superb rightness about them, in particular Altonell Hines as the commere, Elwood Smith as the compere, Edward Matthews as St. Ignatius and Inez Matthews as the first St. Theresa. Did I hint that I liked "Four Saints in Three Acts"?

Daily Mirror

April 17, 1952

'Four Saints In 3 Acts' Is For Limited Audience

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The American National Theatre and Academy, in association with Ethel Linder Reiner, revived the provocative "Four Saints in Three Acts" at the Broadway Theatre last evening. A large and enthusiastic audience filled the big house. That is, the Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein fans were enthusiastic.

Some tired businessmen just slept quietly throughout the proceedings. Come to think of it, they were joined by quite a coterie of tired ladies. They were probably dreaming blissfully of "Top Banana" just down the street. They were the kind of people who want to know what the words mean in a show—or even in an opera.

"Four Saints in Three Acts" might best be described as a novelty. Sometimes you think it's an opera, and at others an oratorio. The Thomson music, no matter what moods it pursues, falls pleasantly on the ears. It is a delightful score for listening or sleeping to. We found it consistently interesting and rewarding.

As for the libretto, it's in the best Gertrude Stein tradition. We have a suspicion that Miss Stein was the greatest practical joker of her time, that she enjoyed immensely the efforts of her devotees to decipher the meanings of her necklaces of words. That she could string words together in somewhat hypnotic combinations, there is no denying.

But in the opinion of this literary lowbrow, it all added up to superlative gibberish. She proved, however, that there is a lot of dough in doubletalk if you happen to be a super-salesman. And she was that. She really knew how to sell the chi-chi set a bill of goods, or words.

If you happen to be addicted to parlor games, you might visit the Broadway and see if you can find any significance or meaning in the Stein book. If successful, it will probably prove that you have a vivid imagination. And you might let us in on your findings.

Paul Morrison has designed gorgeous scenery and costumes, after original models by Florine Stettheimer. He uses colorful props against dazzling blue draperies, which are manipulated into eye-appealing patterns. The settings are framed by an attractive, lace-like border.

The musical direction by composer Thomson and the staging by Maurice Grosser are excellent. There are helpful choreographic groupings by William Dollar.

The cast is quite wonderful. Inez and Edward Matthews, Rawn Spearman, Elwood Smith and Altonell Hines are the featured principals. But every member of the company merits a rousing salute.

"Four Saints in Three Acts" proved peculiarly exciting for us. It held our interest even as we wondered why. But it is for a limited audience. There are a lot of people who will have a better time at "Pal Joey."

Journal American

April 17, 1952

A Unique Experience; A Handsome Show

By MILES KASTENDIECK

VIRGIL Thomson's "Four Saints in Three Acts" returned to confound and to charm the sophisticated and the pure-in-heart at the Broadway Theatre last night.

As fresh as it was in 1934, as simple and naive in its nice confusion as it will always be, it has been revived in a handsome production by ANTA and given the stamp of authenticity by having Thomson as artistic and musical director.

This is an opera in the extraordinary sense. It has no story that is a story. Perhaps it would be best described as a state of mind. It can be taken literally as such, yet there is nothing literal in it. There couldn't be with a libretto by Gertrude Stein.

What, then, is it all about? Since there are more saints than four and more acts than three (though there are only two intermissions), inquiry along this line might best be abandoned.

It is actually an experience in sound artfully contrived. The sound of words as words, the sound of notes as music, their combination and their interdependence, weaves a tonal fabric continuously appealing and constantly novel.

• • •

"FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS" concerns the religious life. It depicts its child-like gaiety, it suggests its mystical atmosphere, it creates its simple solemnity. To follow it too closely for meaning is to discover little more than intelligible nonsense. To accept it for what it presents in sight but more in sound is to fall under its spell and be taken in completely.

As for the four saints, they are St. Settlement, St. Theresa, St. Ignatius and St. Chavez. But St. Theresa is most in the limelight until Act III, and she is played by two people. One sits, the other stands. One is inside, the other outside. St. Ignatius dominates Act III and sings the famous "Pigeons on the Grass, Alas." The other two saints exist by courtesy along with still others.

It falls to Inez Matthews to sing St. Theresa I. The role is ideal for showing off the lovely equalities of her voice. Her brother Edward Matthews sings St. Ignatius (as he did in the original production). He does it with benevolent authority.

Rawn Spearman contributes some fine moments as St. Chavez. The other voices of this all-Negro cast fall into a kind of uniform pattern befitting their saintly likenesses.

• • •

FULFILLING THE ROLES of Commere and Compere (masters of ceremonies) Altonell Hines and Elwood Smith (the latter notable for his diction), are especially fine. Their conversing with each other, the saints, and the audience give them a prominence they enact in a wholly refreshing manner. Whether their roles actually confuse all the issues possibly heightens the enjoyment.

What Thomson achieves is a marriage of word and note that is exceptional. His use of diatonic harmonies and scales, of hymn-tune and revival-meeting structure, of simplicity and purity of sound in scoring makes the wedding a perfect one.

His collaboration with Stein is as closely amalgamated as that of Gilbert and Sullivan. It is his musical punctuation that gives the book any semblance of sense. The strength of the score, however, exists in its melodic unity. Its tunefulness lingers in the mind long after departing from the theatre.

Paul Morrison has created the scenery and costumes after the original models of Florine Stettheimer. The shining blue backdrop has been ingeniously devised. It even conforms to the setting for Act. II: "Might it be mountains if it were not Barcelona."

• • •

WILLIAM DOLLAR'S choreography is functionally simple, providing for a certain artlessness in the performances of the "ballet." The book direction of Maurice Grosser helps clarify much of the text.

It might be that the celestially placid movement achieved by Thomson's direction could be pointed up to advantage. Sharper accentuation and a stronger dramatic touch would enhance a performance in a theatre as large as the Broadway.

The charm generated last night pulled the first-night audience out of what bewilderment it might have been in to applaud enthusiastically after the final curtain.

"Four Saints in Three Acts" is a unique experience in the theatre. For Thomson it is a masterpiece.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 17, 1952

'Four Saints in Three Acts'

By WALTER F. KERR

"Four Saints in Three Acts," the celebrated tour de force with which Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein startled, irritated, and delighted the 1930s is with us again in a handsome and heart-warming production. The American National Theater and Academy has persuaded Mr. Thomson to remount the work for a two-week stand at the Broadway, before setting forth on an extended European jaunt, and the opportunity to catch up on a controversial and inexplicably magical modern opera is not to be lightly passed by.

As neither Miss Stein's admirers nor detractors need to be told, "Four Saints in Three Acts" is impudently non-literal. There are not three acts, but four; not four saints, but twelve. There are two St. Theresas so that St. Theresa may commune with herself ("Nobody visits more than they do visit them"). And Miss Stein's syntax is, as always, defiantly her own ("This is a setting which is as soon, ordinary setting which is as soon").

There is only one way in which this spontaneous, irrepressible and happily irrational invention can be dealt with, and that is simply as music. It either communicates directly and intuitively, or it does not communicate at all. The burden passes quickly to Mr. Thomson, who must find musical inspiration in Miss Stein's free-wheeling improvisation, and who must then give it coherent and telling musical form.

The peculiar miracle of "Four Saints in Three Acts," for this reviewer at least, is the extraordinary honesty and felicity with which Thomson has taken over what might have been merely a conceit, and given it simplicity, ingenuousness, and emotional accuracy which is true and perfectly sustained.

But Mr. Thomson's contribution, and that of the singers, is to be handled in another corner this morning. Suffice it to say that the ovation which was given the composer at the beginning of the third act Wednesday night—Thomson is also conducting the current performance — was thoroughly deserved.

The physical production, adapted by Paul Morrison from the earlier models of Florine Stettheimer, is enchanting. Here again is the lace-valentine proscenium, the stage swathed in cellophane. Pink palm trees, tinseled canopies, heart-shaped chairs, and a yellow cotton lion with an orange mane all carry forward the deliciously childlike and utterly unaffected gayety of the work.

The performers, too, bring a straight-faced and absurdly earnest belief to the wry and solemnly witty goings-on. Altonell Hines, as the Commere, is especially winning in her prim concern that all shall be understood. Inez Matthews makes a charming St. Theresa I, particularly in the sweetness of her "April Fool's Day" passage, and Rawn Spearman is a strikingly vigorous St. Chavez.

Edward Matthews is a pure joy as St. Ignatius, whether he is leading the choral group in "Pigeons on the grass, alas" or participating in the "She never knew about it" trio which concludes the first act. And I was awfully happy with a candle-lit procession in which the chorus, to a mocking orchestral accompaniment, asked insistently how much of the evening was finished.

If there is a weakness in the current ANTA revival, it is in the somewhat arbitrary and uninspired choreography of William Dollar. Though Maurice Grosser has staged the book with grace and ease, Mr. Dollar seems to have derived no authentic impulse from the score. His static patterns, though conventional, are attractive enough; but his movement fails to establish its own absolute authority, and winds up seeming the only irrelevant element in a remarkable, and remarkably difficult, fusion of styles.

Let the wary be warned: "Four Saints in Three Acts" offers neither a narrative to be followed nor prose to be analyzed. But it is a delightfully relaxing experience for those who will relax with it. And its jaunty opulence is a treat for the eye.

DAILY NEWS
April 17, 1952

'Four Saints in Three Acts' Again Musical, Mystical and Very Funny

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

Well, maybe I am just a dead pigeon on . . . uh . . . on the grass, alas, or even a magpie in the sky, the sky, but I liked that thing back in 1934 and I liked it even better last night. That thing I'm talking about is the Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thomson "Four Saints in Three Acts."

Revived after 18 years by ANTA, Robert Whitehead and Ethel Linder Reiner, "Four Saints" last night was put on view for two weeks at the Broadway Theatre, which is about four sizes too big for Stein songs but which has an orchestra pit big enough for the kind of orchestra the "Saints" deserve. And last night Thomson himself was at the orchestra controls.

Once you have said that the Thomson score is one of the most comprehensive pieces of music you've ever heard—comprehensive in that it comprises practically every kind of music from pop ballads to true opera—it is almost impossible to analyze the "Saints." Just as it is impossible to analyze the late, wondrous Gertrude. Everybody has had a whack at analyzing her work and I have, too. I think that she was trying to use words and vowels and syllables and even syntax purely to make music and rhythm. That's what I think. Others think differently.

Whether Miss Stein ever meant her work to be taken seriously, I will never know. But Thomson obviously does. And so do the singers and dancers in it. They even read the funny lines, lines which come at you when least expected, with a straight face. And you must pay attention all the time or you're liable to miss a funny line.

For instance, just as a completely incomprehensible passage gets rolling an actor will stop and say "This is not the way they like it." Or what, musically, might be expected to be a dirge turns out to have a lyric which, in entirety, consists of the phrase "Nobody visits more than they do visit them." Or, when everybody trains their eyes on the illusion (if that's what it was) of a palace in the sky all anybody can think to ask about it is "How many windows are there in it?"

Edward Matthews, a pint-sized baritone, is the only holdover from the 1934 production remembered and once again he worries, alas, about pigeons on the grass — or there? Inez Matthews, of the haunting soprano voice, is one of two St. Theresas (the one half out of doors, apparently), and the contralto Betty Lou Allen is the other. Do not ask me who plays who, as far as the other roles go, but I am here to report that the matched and blended voices of Altonell Hines, Elwood Smith, Rawn Spearman, Calvin Dash, Doris Mayes, Clyde Turner and Martha Flowers are always ready and willing to offer some purely beautiful sounds.

The sets and costumes are by Paul Morrison and, while expensive and garishly elegant, are a little Cotton Club-ish. William Dollar's choreography isn't the standout that Frederick Ashton's was originally. The setting this time is a too-shiny blue cyclorama instead of the pink gimmick which made a softer and more pliable background for the first production. But these are minor complaints.

Extra Dialogue.

There was a bit of extra dialogue last night which the late Miss Stein might have fully approved. In the first act Thomson and some of his musicians had a fairly loud discussion. Seems some of the boys were playing from page 43 instead of page 41. Nobody else noticed.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

April 17, 1952

'4 Saints in 3 Acts' Takes Curtain Call

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Four Saints in Three Acts" is probably the most widely and constantly quoted theatrical work of the last 25 years.

Gertrude Stein wrote it with her inimitable love for the sound of word combinations, regardless of their sense, and Virgil Thomson composed a score for it that was considered in 1934 practically futuristic. Florine Stettheimer dressed it gaily, like a brightly colored wedding cake, and it was sung by a talented Negro cast, for 48 performances.

Over the years, the piece has become legendary. Some people claim to have seen it more often than it was performed. The whole thing added up to a pretty, festive, sophisticated emotion. That is just about what it still is, a happy joke, except that the Thomson music will jolt nobody these days, but seems quite pleasantly melodic.

Alas and the Siamese.

The best known passage of the libretto is Miss Stein's observation about "pigeons on the grass." You have to listen to the noise of her words, and forget they are from a vocabulary meant to be communicative. Often the dialogue reminds you of lines from "The King and I" at its most Siamese.

"Having happily had it with a spoon" drew one of last night's biggest laughs. Also popular were "Nobody visits more than they do visits them" and "at standing she could be sitting."

For a sample, one sequence plays with the words "wed," "dead," "said" and "led," and the action is a marriage parade in black and white costumes, to a grand rising chorus.

Color, Theater, Music.

The show looks lovely. In the opening scene, the twin Saint Theresas are dressed as scarlet Cardinals within a white lace proscenium, and against a glittery blue sky.

Both musically and dramatically the work gains interest as it progresses. The first act seemed static last night, aurally and visually. But the whole show will probably loosen up and seem gayer with a few performances. Its only real failing in point of view is the choreography which uses conventional patterns, unimpressively executed.

Ines Matthews sings the major role beautifully. A soprano, she may well be the only person alive except the original who can sound like Marian Anderson.

Edward Matthews sings authoritatively and has a grand manner which superbly suits Saint Ignatious. Several of the female voices are remarkable, if not easily identifiable, but the cast as a whole does nobly.

The composer conducted the premiere with great spirit.

"The Chase"

Daily Mirror

April 16, 1952

'The Chase' Is Honest And Moving Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "The Chase," Horton Foote has written an honest play about a civilized sheriff of a Texas county. Sheriff Hawes opposes mob violence, upholds the law and attempts to ferret out the motives that send men to his jail. Living up to his duties as a public servant of integrity is a trying occupation. There are times when he wants to give it all up in despair and turn to farming.

Such a time comes again when Bubber Reeves escapes from the state penitentiary. Though he has vowed to get the sheriff who put him there, Hawes determines to capture him alive. Many of the citizens, fed up with Bubber's murderous depredations, want him killed. Even if they have to take the law into their own hands and do it themselves.

Ironically, it is sheriff Hawes who is eventually forced to kill Bubber, to do the very thing he has sworn to prevent. And as he is on the point of resigning, the mother of another bad boy—this one a 12-year-old—calls on him for help. Weary and sick at heart, he promises to do what he can to straighten the kid out.

You may see from this brief synopsis that Foote has penned an earnest, a searching play. He has sacrificed melodramatics to preserve the integrity of his story. In this, he has had the cooperation of producer-director Jose Ferrer. Ferrer has schooled a top-flight cast with restrained skill, with a skill that disguises some of the drama's weaknesses.

John Hodiak has left Hollywood temporarily to make an auspicious New York stage debut in "The Chase." That Hodiak is able to bring out the humanity of Hawes, without making him seem a nice-Nelly, to round him out as a person, is a tribute to his acting ability. Kim Hunter, but recently returned from film successes, is excellent as his sympathetic wife.

Murray Hamilton, as the vengeful Bubber; Nan McFarland, as Bubber's distraught mother; Lonny Chapman and Kim Stanley, as a pair of outcasts from whom Bubber browbeats help; and G. Albert Smith, as a compassionate townsman, are outstanding. Sam Byrd and Ted Yaryan do their best by a couple of selfish trouble-makers, roles that could easily have been ridiculous in less competent hands. And we think you'll be hearing more in the future from Richard Poston and Lin McCarthy, cast as young deputy sheriffs.

Albert Johnson has designed economical and effective sets.

As to the title. "The Chase" is the unending struggle of life, with its perplexities and heartbreaks, its frustrations and rewards. A struggle in which the thinking pursuer is as broken as the pursued. It represents the intelligent man's try for a better society, though the odds seem sometimes insurmountable.

The first-nighters at the Playhouse gave the new arrival a rousing reception. For us, it was a deeply moving and stimulating play for much of its three acts. It has faults, but it is easy to forget them. Foote has so much to say and says it so well that we must recommend "The Chase" to you.

"THE CHASE"

Play by Horton Foote; staged by Jose Ferrer; scenery by Albert Johnson; costumes by George Bockman; produced by Mr. Ferrer in association with Milton Baron at the Playhouse Theatre, April 15, 1952. The cast:

Sheriff Hawes.....John Hodiak
Rip.....Richard Poston
Tarl.....Lin McCarthy
Ruby Hawes.....Kim Hunter
Edwin Stewart.....Sam Byrd
Mr. Douglas....G. Albert Smith
Anna Reeves.....Kim Stanley
Mrs. Reeves....Nan McFarland
Knub McDermont.....
Lonny Chapman
Bubber Reeves.....
Murray Hamilton
Hawks Damon.....Ted Yaryan

The New York Times

April 16, 1952

Horton Foote's Texan Drama, 'The Chase,' Staged at the Playhouse by Ferrer

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Horton Foote has written a Western with an ethical point, "The Chase," put on by Jose Ferrer at the Playhouse last evening. After three acts and nine scenes, a ruminative theatregoer is likely to wonder whether the Western without the ethic or the ethic without the Western might not be an improvement. For "The Chase" is neither one thing nor the other, and Mr. Ferrer's direction is self-conscious and pretentious. Apart from some well-written small scenes, which are also well-acted, Mr. Foote's drama does not make much impression on the theatre.

* * *

As a native Texan who has not lost his fondness for home, Mr. Foote contributed a savory and tenderly-written essay about his home-town to the world's most cultivated newspaper last Sunday. At least one reader hoped that "The Chase" would bring a town to life just as vividly. In a sense it does. Sheriff Hawes is the focal point for many things that are going on in town. The sheriff, his wife, his deputies, the citizens who drop in for a visit and even criminals and ne'er-do-wells on the outskirts are interesting people. Mr. Foote's character sketches are honest and have literary flavor.

His story may be equally authentic, but it gives an impression of being imposed on the characters by the author. A killer has broken out of jail, and is loose in the town again. Although he intends to kill the sheriff, the sheriff is sworn to capture him and return him to jail alive. At the crucial moment the sheriff loses his nerve and kills the escaped prisoner. Mr. Foote intends this to be a highly dramatic point. But by the middle of the third act there is not much drama left in his play.

* * *

In the time he could spare from "The Shrike" across the street, Mr. Ferrer has provided a graphic production for "The Chase," and he has cast it admirably. Albert Johnson's two settings of a corner of the jail and a cabin in the woods are pungent pieces of work in a dramatic style.

The acting is excellent. As the sheriff, John Hodiak plays with a loose, leisurely sincerity that is thoroughly agreeable; he is also lucky because Kim Hunter plays the part of the sheriff's wife. Three students of the drama strolling down Broadway after the final curtain enthusiastically persuaded each other that Miss Hunter is getting prettier all the time. They did not discuss art, but Miss Hunter's art is all right, too.

Since the casting is shrewd and all the actors are talented, every performance has a flavor of its own. Nan McFarland's distraught mother of the killer; Kim Stanley's slow-witted wife; Murray Hamilton's wildman, and Lonny Chapman's moody accomplice; the townsmen played with individuality by Sam Byrd, Ted Yaryan and G. Albert Smith, and the two deputy sheriffs by Richard Poston and Lin McCarthy—are sharply individualized characters worthy of a richer script.

* * *

But Mr. Ferrer has directed the performance portentously with long pauses and still-life groupings as though he were creating art out of melodrama. "The Chase" is over-directed. Having done a lot of brilliant work this season, Mr. Ferrer is entitled to a wild oat. Consider that he has sown it. Okay.

Journal American

April 16, 1952

Violence Highlights Drama of Suspense

By JIM O'CONNOR

"THE CHASE," a new play by Horton Foote—starring John Hodiak and Kim Hunter—started last night at The Playhouse. It was produced and directed by Jose Ferrer. And it's a real arouser!

Flashlights stab the darkness...A sheriff and his deputies hunt and shout...A killer is on the loose!

He is Bubber Reeves, sent to prison by Sheriff Hawes. Bubber has vowed to kill the sheriff on sight.

Here is drama; here is suspense; here is action; here is excitement; here is violence; here is sudden death.

A strong performance is registered by John Hodiak as Sheriff Hawes. A motion picture star, he is making his legitimate stage debut in "The Chase." He is starting at the top and deservedly so.

At all times, Hodiak is in charge. Disdaining heroics, he makes his role believable.

* * *

Shining Star

IN FACT, the entire cast of "The Chase" plays in an unbelievably believable manner.

Once more Kim Hunter proves she is an actress who can act—a star who really shines. She scores as Ruby Hawes, the sheriff's wife, without resorting to hysterics or histrionics.

The plot of "The Chase" builds a jittery, jumpy mood on stage—and off.

There's a feeling of watching, watching...waiting, waiting...worrying, worrying. The tension is almost like a nightmare. It's enough to give you goose-pimples.

I won't tell you how it all ends, except to say "The Chase" can make your blood run cold.

Contrived? Sure, I know it contrived. "The Chase" has been contrived into one of the best plays on Broadway.

The cast is studded with good actors and good actresses.

Outstanding in a small role is Kim Stanley as Anna Reeves, Bubber's wife and Knub's girl-friend. Her facial expression, gestures, mannerisms all contributed to a well delineated character. She is a TV actress who studied in those off-Broadway studios and workshops. Mark Kim Stanley as a comer.

Striking, too, is Nan McFarland as Bubber's mother—especially when she lets her emotions go.

Murray Hamilton is sullen, smoldering, sneering, snarling as Bubber Reeves, the desperate escaped convict. Others who do good jobs are Ted Yaryan, Sam Byrd and Lonny Chapman.

* * *

SUSPENSE was created in the first act; mounted in the second; exploded into violence in the third. "The Chase" held me from beginning to end.

Jose Ferrer directed with consummate skill, even to the extent of having all members of the cast speak with a Texas drawl at all times.

The action takes place within 24 hours in a Texas town and is revealed in three acts and nine scenes. Time is the present.

Realistic Sets

There are two realistic sets designed by Albert Johnson—the office of the jail, which is the headquarters of Sheriff Hawes, and Knub McDermont's shack in the woods. Grim, gripping action rotates between these two points.

Key character in "The Chase" is not the hunted escaped convict, however.

It is the sheriff. It is he who is pursued in "The Chase." It is he who is harassed, bullied, threatened by his neighbors and friends because, as sheriff, he is faithful to his trust.

And as the curtain descends, Sheriff Hawes is starting anew to perform his duty as a public servant—without fear or favor.

"The Chase" is as chilling as a shot in the dark!

New York Post

April 16, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Manhunt in a Texas Community

The indefatigable Jose Ferrer, the one-man theater, has turned his eminent talent to the staging of "The Chase," a drama by Horton Foote about a manhunt in Texas, and the result was locally on display for the first time at the Playhouse last night. Although some pleasantly melodramatic excitement is stirred up and the production is alive with the director's characteristic vitality, "The Chase" suffers from a tendency to repeat itself in the manner of an over-extended one-act play, and I doubt if it can be considered the latest in Mr. Ferrer's series of triumphs, but much of it is decidedly interesting.

With all respect for Mr. Foote, who can write with a feeling for character and locality, it is, I think, Mr. Ferrer's contribution that gives the new play its measure of effectiveness. For one thing, there is his unfailing skill in selecting actors. Every part seems cast to perfection, and, in assigning the leading role to John Hodiak, a screen player making his first appearance on the stage, he has shown particular wisdom. Playing a decent and conscientious sheriff, who hates the thought of killing a man, Mr. Hodiak gives a performance which demonstrates once more that there are some fine actors in Hollywood.

Dynamic Drive

The other important quality that Ferrer has brought to his production is his vitality. As I have said, "The Chase" is a rather thin play that has difficulty in both lasting an entire evening and knowing how to come to a close, and it does have an unfortunate way of going over and over the same ground. But the director has done wonders in concealing its weakness by giving the halting narrative a dynamic drive and an intensity that make it almost steadily interesting. It is quite possible to sit in the Playhouse and be aware of the work's difficulty in reaching its goal without having your attention lag.

In "The Chase," Mr. Foote is telling what happened to a sleepy Texas town when a notorious killer escapes from prison and returns in search of vengeance. The man he is most anxious to get is the sheriff, but the sheriff is virtually the only person in the community who doesn't want to see the fugitive killed. The townspeople are all for lynching the killer, and they are enraged at the long-suffering law officer who hopes to capture him and save him from the mob. It is hardly giving away a secret to say that there is an ironic ending in which the sheriff unwillingly becomes a killer.

Texas Town

Thanks to both the casting and the writing, the Texas town becomes an entirely believable community, and the manhunt is also made dramatically credible. The killer, however, is less completely drawn, and, while Nan McFarland has a scene of effective intensity as his bitter and hopeless mother, the woman somehow never seemed to me to belong to the same play. The ending, too, is one of the drama's weaknesses. Certainly its ironic point could have been more effectively made than it is.

For almost the entire first act, "The Chase" is striking and exciting, but, later on, it begins to waver.

Mr. Hodiak's virile and honest portrait of the sheriff is a splendid characterization that dominates the evening, but the other players seem almost equally right. In the small role of the killer's dull, frightened and unfaithful wife, Kim Stanley is particularly believable and understanding, while Kim Hunter as the sheriff's wife, Murray Hamilton as the fugitive, Lonny Chapman as his unwilling helper, G. Albert Smith as a sensible citizen, and Sam Byrd and Ted Yaryan as townspeople with a mob psychology are of vast help to the evening. It is a shame "The Chase" doesn't quite live up to its production.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Herald~~ Sun

April 16, 1952

'The Chase' Moralizes Via Lynch-Law Tale

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Chase" is a moralizing melodrama told with a wealth of severe tension that ends up being more nervous than exciting.

The play occurs in a Tobacco Road of East Texas. A wild killer escapes from the penitentiary. "The good people of this town" would like to lynch him. The sheriff is determined to keep law and order by catching him alive and returning him to the proper officials for execution.

Refined Moral.

To refine the moral issue of how far a private citizen can take law enforcement into his own hands, the killer is made a mad dog whose end is inevitable, by one force or another.

Then to make him interesting, it is suggested by his mother that he was taught the evil he knew by some unnamed forces when he first got out of her control as a child. This provocative issue is never cleared up.

In the end, the killer is surrounded. In a confusing bit of action, the sheriff riddles him with bullets in exactly the action he has determined to prevent.

He condemns himself as a coward, but agrees with his wife finally that a man can only go on trying.

Nothing Left.

In view of the theatrical way the townspeople have turned on him when he refused to drop the chase and protect each of them individually, there does not seem much left for the sheriff to try for, at least in this particular county.

John Hodiak plays the idealistic sheriff with enough simplicity to give the play a documentary atmosphere, which is often exciting.

Kim Hunter is the wife, pleasantly so, in a role familiar after her years with "Streetcar," since she is once more pregnant with a Southern accent.

Nan McFarland is electrifying in a first-act scene as the killer's mother. Her role is later sacrificed to plot.

Murray Hamilton is vivid as the killer, and Kim Stanley projects all the drab pathos of his faithless wife.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 16, 1952

'The Chase'

By WALTER F. KERR

JOSE FERRER'S ambition to fill every vacant theater on 48th Street is a laudable one, but with "The Chase," which opened at the Playhouse last night, he has overextended himself. Mr. Ferrer already has two whopping hits—"Stalag 17" and "The Shrike"—playing in the neighborhood, and it was probably just not in the cards that he should deliver a third. It comes as a real surprise, though, that a man who specializes in showy theatrical values should have picked and produced such an essentially dull play.

"The Chase" is no intriguing experiment which doesn't quite come off. It is a sluggish, emotionally flat piece of writing. It is, in fact, for all the world like a watered down western with moral commercials.

Though author Horton Foote has provided himself with a naturally suspenseful situation—a small-town sheriff learns that a killer is on his way to get him—he has repeatedly sidetracked the excitement inherent in his story, in favor of incidental speculation on the whys and wherefores of killing.

The sheriff cannot bring himself to go after his man, so absorbed is he in his own hatred of violence. He mulls, stews, and berates himself for not being able to bring in his man alive. The killer's mother gets on stage and stays there long enough to detail her boy's misguided childhood. We pick up the killer at a cabin in the woods—the two forces of the play are a long, long time coming together—only to have him digress on his own world-weariness.

"The Chase" is, as a result, anything but a chase. Its action moves in eternally parallel lines as its two opponents avoid one another skittishly, and the author is hard put to it to prolong his duel. Prolong it he does, though, through nine dawdling scenes so that every aspect of the sheriff's moral problem can be examined.

What hurts still more is the fact that the moral issue itself is not quite a real one. Bubber Reeves, just escaped from the state pen, is already up for murder. He has threatened to kill half the characters in the play—a local banker, his own wife, his wife's lover, and the sheriff himself—and while he is on the rampage he does actually do in an innocent bystander. Sheriff Hawes' problem is this: won't it be wrong of him to shoot down Bubber, should the occasion arise?

Because it is hard to believe in the urgency of this dilemma, our sympathies are never really enlisted. John Hodiak tries hard to bring stature and intensity to the figure of the distressed officer. He sucks in his breath, flexes his jaw, and commands the stage with some force. But there is no real dimension to the cardboard hero. Mr. Foote has created, and Mr. Hodiak cannot pump any life into him.

Kim Hunter, as his wife, is saddled with tender disquisitions on "the baby inside-a her, growin' and growin'" and with the necessity for nuzzling Mr. Hodiak on each entrance while saying piteously, "Gosh, honey, you look so tired."

It is difficult to keep the backwoods Texas types who make up the balance of the cast from caricature, but Murray Hamilton, as Bubber, gets a grim honesty into his more relaxed moments, and Kim Stanley is especially effective as the waif who loses her nerve in the midst of so much violence.

It is typical of "The Chase" that when a fist fight seems to be brewing, one character says "Will you let me talk?" and the other shouts back "All right—talk!" And they talk.

DAILY NEWS
April 16, 1952

John Hodiak an Admirable Sheriff In a Well-Staged Play, 'The Chase'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Horton Foote's "The Chase," which opened last evening at the beautifully redecorated Playhouse on 48th St., could be described as a psychological Western or as a Texas version of Sidney Kingsley's "Detective Story." I enjoyed it and admired it—though more for the way it is staged and acted than for its exciting qualities as a melodrama.

The basis of the plot is a sheriff after a killer. The killer has escaped from prison and is headed for his small home town in Texas, where he has a wife—now living with another man—and a mother. The sheriff is bound by more than duty to capture this man; he is bound by his own high principle to capture the fugitive unharmed, when the easiest thing to do—and the thing the whole town wants done—would be to kill him.

One Emotional Scene.

Jose Ferrer, who is a showman as well as a good actor, has produced and directed "The Chase" and has made it a vivid piece of theatre. John Hodiak, a movie star making his debut as a round actor on Broadway, is giving an admirable performance as the sheriff; he looks, moves, talks and thinks the way such a character should do, and I welcome him to the footlights. Kim Hunter has a rather unrewarding role as the sheriff's pregnant wife, who can't do much more than knit tiny garments and hope her old man comes home safe, but Miss Hunter is an excellent actress and she puts a lot of sweet appeal into the part.

Foote's drama alternates its scenes between the sheriff's office in this small Texas town and the shanty cabin of a lout named Knub McDermont. It is for this cabin that the killer, one Bubber Reeves, heads after he has escaped from prison; he goes there because his wife is living wth Knub and they probably will shelter and feed him.

The author, Foote, and the director, Ferrer, have collaborated interestingly in making a sheriff, townsfolk bent on a lynching and a desperate fugitive talk and act like ordinary people. The only high-pitched emotional outburst in the play occurs when the convict's mother pleads with the sheriff not to kill her son, but to take him alive. This is a sharp, vivid scene, beautifully done by Nan McFarland.

Fine Cast All Through.

The cast could not be bettered. Murray Hamilton has a fine, quiet desperation in his playing of the hunted man; Lonny Chapman is completely real as the slow-witted Knub McDermond, and Kim Stanley is effective as the killer's young, frightened and stupid wife. There are good performances also by Sam Byrd, G. Albert Smith and Ted Yaryan as townsmen, and by Richard Poston and Lin McCarthy as a couple of deputies. Ferrer knows how to pick actors and how to direct them after he gets them.

There is no point in my telling here whether the fugitive is captured alive or not, but I have a suggestion for the tightening of the drama—giving it a punch at the end. The sheriff has come to hate his job, but he goes through with it, and he knows he is going to have to keep on going through with it. At the end of the play a woman on the phone says her 12-year-old son is a runaway and even at this tender age is incorrigible, and will the sheriff do something about it. Wearily the officer says he will talk to the lad tomorrow. Instead, I think, he should be permitted his one moment of high-pitched melodrama; he could tell this mother on the phone, "I know which way your boy is headed. Tell him for me that if he keeps on the way he's going, ten years from now I'm going to have to kill him."

"The Brass Ring"

New York Post

April 11, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Point of Diminishing Return

Irving Elman's "The Brass Ring," which opened at the Lyceum Theater last night, suffers from its odd similarity to "Point of No Return." Another story of the seemingly successful man of middle years, who examines that success and finds he has sacrificed his youthful dreams for it, the new play lacks the smooth, glib showmanship of the popular dramatization of J. P. Marquand's novel, and, although it has some excellent performances and possesses an interest of its own, the parallel with the earlier work does get in the way, and I'm afraid that its final effect is less than satisfactory.

Among its similarities to "Point of No Return" is its propensity for eating its cake and still trying to hold on to it. Its account of the dreams, frustrations and wistful rebellion of its central figure is a sad and tormented one, and the picture it paints of both the present and future of the unhappy business man's son and daughter serves only to add to its melancholy overtones until the play assumes all the proportions of a complete study in disillusionment. Then, with as little conviction as the Marquand dramatization offers, it goes in for a final outburst of happy optimism.

Staying Home

In the end, I suspect that it really has little to say about the issue it has been contemplating. Its hero, who is on the verge of leaving his wife and home to have his long-delayed fling in Paris, presumably learns that it is philosophically wrong to indulge in such selfishness, but the author certainly doesn't make it clear that his reasons for staying home are entirely altruistic. The chief reason seems to be that he runs into his idealized youthful sweetheart on the train and finds she has grown silly and unattractive. It is a sufficient justification, but hardly the noble one the play indicates.

That matter of eating and holding onto the cake is also suggested in the pleasant fate of the daughter. The young lady, who appears in her father's dreams as the youthful incarnation of his sweetheart, has trouble making up her mind between going to Paris for a literary career and marrying a nice young man at home, and, in the end, she is seemingly on the verge of getting both of her wishes. All of these matters strike me as fairly sizable defects, but "The Brass Ring" is by no means all weaknesses. It has some effectively written scenes, some credible characterizations, and a considerable share of understanding compassion.

Matter of Promise

Indeed, although Mr. Elman has failed to write a sufficiently impressive drama, he shows signs of a great deal of promise and at least a measure of achievement. He is considerably aided, too, by the production, Stanley Gould's direction, and all of the casting. Certainly, his play is by no means a bore. The trouble is that the similarity with "Point of No Return" is close enough to be disturbing, while its wistful contemplation of a middle-aged man and his dreams lacks the final touch of insight and revelation that might have atoned for its reminiscent quality.

Sidney Blackmer, who finally came into his own as an actor in "Come Back, Little Sheba," plays the central figure with striking sensitivity and understanding. Bethel Leslie, one of the finest of the younger actresses, and Douglas Watson, one of the best of the young actors, are excellent as the two children, and there are fine performances by Carol Goodner as the sensible mother, Patricia Benoit as the secretary in love with the son, and Conrad Janis, who has a couple of engagingly humorous scenes as the boy in love with the daughter. "The Brass Ring" is another of those upsetting "promising" plays.

"THE BRASS RING"

Play by Irving Elman; staged by Stanley Gould; scenery and costumes by Elfi Von Kantzow; presented by Donald Wolin in association with Donald Flamm at the Lyceum Theatre, April 10, 1952. The cast:

George Westman.....Sidney Blackmer
Margaret Westman.....Carol Goodner
Herbert Westman.....Douglas Watson
George's father.....Paul Ford
George's mother.....Margaretta Warwick
Joan Westman....Bethel Leslie
Conductor....Joseph Leberman
Rosemary Adams.....Patricia Benoit
Charlie Butler....Conrad Janis
Spence.....Fred Irving Lewis
Cora Potter.....Helene Dumas

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 11, 1952

'The Brass Ring' Rings the Bell

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Here is the sweetest play of the season, called "The Brass Ring." The title refers to the shiny circle you sometimes catch on a merry-go-round, which entitles you to a free ride.

The question this little comedy poses is just who gets the prize, the fellow who runs away from convention to "face life," or the one who finds a secure happiness he must share with others, which probably looks awfully humdrum.

In a moving picture technique, the comedy uses a revolving stage, transparencies and plain curtains. It tells of the present and the remembered past of a successful businessman who suddenly begins to wonder whether he made the right choice long ago.

Two Generations of Flings.

Now he has two grown children, about to decide what to do with their own lives. His wife is content with ordinary suburban life. He is stirred to recall the moment when he might have run off to Paris after a girl he once loved. He gets so discontented with his nightmares and his memories that he buys a ticket to Paris in a vague hope that he can catch up.

In a few hours he finds that his daughter, like him, wants her fling before she settles down. He helps his son financially to make an ungallant decision about a girl. But the son finds he wants the familiar life.

Alas, Poor Yesterday.

When the man meets his nearly forgotten sweetheart, it is shattering to find her shallow and dull, with no trace of the bright rebel he recalled.

The play stands simply for following one's heart, wherever it leads. It is short and very direct. After a few minutes you get used to the rapid changes of setting and mood. You find, too, that sequences which seem to trail off with indeterminate curtain lines are actually leading into the following scenes.

Last night the play showed all the signs of being a sleeper. It sneaked up on the audience. Between laughs, which are frequent, there was plenty of indulgent sniffling going on through the Lyceum.

It Gets at You.

The truth is the slender play gets at you with much more honest, appreciable emotion than many pretentious plays on similar themes.

The central role is underplayed with very touching effect by Sidney Blackmer, and Carol Goodner gives an agreeable color to the plain part of the wife. Bethel Leslie and Douglas Watson both have sure fresh acting approaches for the two children. Patricia Benoit is deeply touching as a secretary, and Conrad Janis had the house in the palm of his hand as a saucy, matter of fact youngster.

It seems to me that the direction of Stanley Gould makes the most of this unprentious play at every turn. It also makes the actors look fine, perhaps because you feel they have been allowed to find comfortable methods of achieving the desired results.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

April 11, 1952

'The Brass Ring'

By WALTER F. KERR

IF "THE BRASS RING," which turned up at the Lyceum Thursday night, proves an extremely pleasant evening in the theater, it is probably because it doesn't take itself too seriously.

Author Irving Elman is dwelling —once again—on the plight of the American business man who once had dreams of gay and adventurous independence, and now finds himself bound to a suburban family and a routine job.

The virtue of his comedy is its light-heartedness, its refusal to blow up the small and essentially funny domestic crisis into an imposing sociological document, its determination to look at the nostalgic daydreams of middle life for the gentle absurdities they really are.

Mr. Elman is fond of his people, and he can be very funny about their peccadilloes. George Westman has spent twenty-five years wondering whether he oughtn't to have run off to Paris with the spirited girl who was going to paint, instead of settling down with a steady, responsible wife and rearing a couple of steady, responsible children. He has nightmares in which he imagines himself literally straightjacketed by his own respectable and conniving parents, and, even as he dictates to his office secretary, he cannot keep his mind from wandering back to the merry-go-round of his youth and the brass ring he never really reached for.

When, one day, he sees his son becoming a stuffy replica of himself, and his daughter yearning for the solo flight he has never ventured on, he decides that the time has come to reverse the years and be true to himself. He charters a plane for Paris.

Mr. Elman, of course, is not of a mind to let his man go. In a series of short and, for the most part, thoroughly engaging family scenes, he jolts George Westman into an awareness that he has wasted a good many years and a ridiculous amount of energy on idle and unrealistic mooning, and he lets George present us with a tidy moral: "When we try to be true to ourselves, we wind up giving everybody else the elbow. We're all tied up with each other."

As is probably clear from the foregoing homily, "The Brass Ring" is not consistently bright. It does slip over into pious sentimentalities from time to time. It does get a little high-flown when it attempts to describe the free life that father and daughter dream of. And it does employ the embarrassingly pat device of sobering father up by having him run across his old flame, now a matron of horrifying conventionality, on a suburban train.

But it is easy to forgive the evening's faults in the freshness of its people and in the gentle mockery of its author's point of view. Furthermore, it is charmingly acted. Sidney Blackmer invests George with a crumpled patience and, later, a wry wisdom which win him enormous affection. Bethel Leslie is delightfully animated as his daughter, whether she is showing exasperated anticipation of her mother's every counsel, slumping in despair over a returned manuscript, or admitting the merely physical attraction she feels for a well-heeled suitor.

Conrad Janis plays the flippant junior executive who tries to clip Miss Leslie's wings with the class and style of a better-dressed and more lovable Marlon Brando. And he makes hay with two built-to-order scenes: one in which he parodies his firm's office routine for the benefit of a newcomer, and another in which he compels an unwilling girl to talk to him on the telephone.

Douglas Watson is amusingly smug as the son whose notions of the successful life are shaken up a bit, Carol Goodner catches the nagging nuances of a worried mother perfectly, Patricia Benoit is disarmingly simple and direct as a young woman who doesn't mind being in "trouble," and Fred Irving Lewis handles a brief bit with a striking honesty.

"The Brass Ring" is not always up to its best moments, but it is funny, it is absorbing, and it is sometimes touching. I had a very pleasant time.

DAILY NEWS

April 11, 1952

Some Good Actors Do Their Best In Uneven Play, 'The Brass Ring'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "The Brass Ring," which had its first performance at the Lyceum Theatre last evening, it appears to be the contention of the author, Irving Elman, that when one is on life's merry-go-round one should grab the brass ring whenever it comes within desperate reach. This is not entirely an original idea, nor is the Elman work an astonishingly original play; but the drama does have some well-written scenes and some honest, engaging performances. Its chief and probably fatal handicaps are its diffuseness and its lack of dramatic highlights; its many scenes, except for one good comedy interlude, are on a repressed and rather unemotional level.

"The Brass Ring" is described in the program as being 24 hours in the life of one George Westman. As the scenes revolve on a turntable, ranging from a bedroom to a commuters' coach to an office—with a dream world perched handily above—it's almost as though J. P. Marquand had tried to write "Death of a Salesman" or Arthur Miller had attempted "Point of No Return"; good plays by the wrong writers.

What Would Have Been?

Author Elman's George Westman, gently, appealingly and persuasively played by Sidney Blackmer, is a medium-sized big wheel in a very big corporation. He has a nice home, a contented wife and an attractive young son and daughter—success enough, one might think. But he wonders if it's enough; wonders if things might not have been better, more exciting, if he had run off to Paris with another girl 25 years ago, as he almost did.

Now his children are where he was then. The daughter is crazy about a boy and the boy is crazy about her—but something makes her want to grab the brass ring and go adventuring alone to Paris, just to find out what will happen. The son is about to follow in his father's footsteps, starting at the bottom of The Company to work up and be a wheel. The father sometimes dreams of what might happen if his boy should lean far out of his already-set orbit and clutch an unknown prize.

Excellent Young Players.

The turntable sets by Elfi von Kantzow move smoothly, and within them are some attractive players. There is an admirable quartet of young actors—Douglas Watson as the son, Patricia Benoit as the secretary with whom he has been dallying, Bethel Leslie as the daughter and Conrad Janis as Miss Leslie's young swain. Janis is excellent in two funny scenes—one describing the duties of a junior clerk in a big company and another in which he woos his girl by phone. Miss Leslie and Miss Benoit are a really fine pair of young actresses.

But Elman has been too gentle with his plot and his people, and so has director Stanley Gould. "The Brass Ring" shows imagination and considerable ability for theatre writing, but it needs pace and sting. There is, incidentally, some very pleasing interlude music by John Barrows.

Daily Mirror

April 11, 1952

'The Brass Ring' Has Some Glitter in It

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The shades of Leibnitz and Voltaire hovered over the Lyceum Theatre last evening, as Donald Wolin and Donald Flamm presented Irving Elman's "The Brass Ring." This time Leibnitz won. For Elman seemed to agree with him that this is a mighty fine world, if not the best of all possible worlds.

But Elman fooled us for a while. He started off as if he were going to give us one of those expressionistic plays of disillusionment, such as swept over from Germany to Broadway back in the 20's. Those were the days when solid business men were held up to ridicule, because they had made money instead of starving in an arty garret.

George Westman had done well as an executive with a big corporation. He had had a rather happy, if placid, married life. He had two grown children. But he wondered if it had all been worth while. Perhaps he should have ditched security for the literary excitements of Montmarrtee. Perhaps he should have fled to Paris with a giddy young artist named Corliss.

Then Westman's son got into trouble with his secretary, and papa had to help him find the right way out. Then he decided to permit his daughter a fling in Europe, such as he had missed, so that she could discover whether she wanted to marry the brashly attractive scion of the company big shot. Then he ran into Corliss, now the flighty Mrs. Cora Potter. And he concluded that life hadn't treated him badly after all.

He was ready to face reality, to turn his back on the empty dream world into which he had been escaping. Like the hero in "Point of No Return," he took stock of his values and found that he'd done pretty well, that a "Fourposter" existence had much to recommend it.

It's a short play that falters through mixed viewpoints. It takes too long arriving at a philosophy. Its semi-expressionistic flashbacks are trite and tepid; they often trip the main plot when it is heading somewhere. But it has scenes that are warming, amusing and often moving.

Sidney Blackmer and Carol Goodner give effective, straightforward performances as the elder Westmans. Douglas Watson and Bethel Leslie, two of our more promising young players, are good as the Westman children. Fred Irving Lewis is excellent as a retiring big wheel of the company who has been satisfied with his life. Patricia Benoit and Helene Dumas are other assets as the secretary and Cora Potter.

But it is Conrad Janis who really runs away with the evening's honors as the Westman girl's breezy and persistent suitor. Looking a little like, talking a little like, and slouching a lot like Frankie Sinatra, he capitalizes handsomely on Elman's best laugh lines. He'll never play Hamlet, but he will, we predict, prove one of our more ingratiating and successful young comedians.

Though Elman makes a creditable and valiant grab for "The Brass Ring," he misses the target. His merry-go-round wobbles every time he has the prize almost in his clutch. But make no mistake about it, he can write.

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Cast Strives Bravely But Play Is Muddled

By JOHN McCLAIN

AN EXTREMELY COURAGEOUS and artful squad of actors, headed by Sidney Blackmer, marched out onto the stage of the Lyceum Theatre last night and put up a stiff tussle for a couple of hours with some indifferent material entitled "The Brass Ring," by Irving Elman.

There were moments when they even seemed to be gaining a slight advantage, when sheer force triumphed briefly over the reminiscent situations, but when the dust finally settled the actors were in full rout.

From the outset, Mr. Elman's encyclical bears a striking resemblance to "Point of No Return," currently playing the Alvin Theatre. This is not to suggest that there isn't room for two good plays on a similar subject; it is to suggest merely that this ain't one.

Like "Return" this drama concerns a solid family man who discovers rather late in life that he is unhappy with his existence, the pursuit of pelf and the maintenance of a pedestrian household.

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THERE HAD BEEN a gossamer girl in his youth who had urged him to scorn convention and follow her to Paris and now, 25 years later, he is having nightmares over this lost will o' the wisp.

These disturbances, plus his daily preoccupations with his past, are sufficient to make him decide, finally, to chuck it all and take a plane to Paris.

But of course almost the minute he's booked passage a series of situations develops with his son and daughter which convinces him that his greater duty lies with his family.

This was not exactly the most refreshing plot even before Mr. Marquand made it into a novel, but Mr. Elman's version seemed to me elaborately muddled.

Just what did the hero intend to do in Paris at the age of 50, alone and not particularly affluent? It was not brought home to me that Mr. Blackmer, the long-suffering businessman, was ever presented with a plausible or valid problem.

Despite this he made a noble effort to bring some semblance of reason to his part, employing restraint and subtlety at times when the script resolved itself into a series of frightening cliches. Carol Goodner operated with equal skill and bravery as his wife, the practical, dreary matron who is determined to keep the family intact.

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Interludes Rewarding

BRIEF MOMENTS of humor and youthful gaiety were supplied by Bethel Leslie, as the daughter, and Conrad Janis, as her suitor. These interludes were so rewarding, in fact, that one wonders of the author might have not been better advised to use these talented youngsters as the central characters for his play —and proceed in a better direction.

Other manful members of the embattled group were Douglas Watson as the son; Patricia Benoit as the son's girl, and Paul Ford as Blackmer's father.

The entire proceedings take place within a structure which revolves in the middle of the stage, allowing for scene changes without dropping the curtain, and I thought Elfi Von Kantzow was at least successful in working out something that served the purpose with a minimum of delay.

Stanley Gould, the director, maintained a pleasant pace throughout — a commendable chore under the circumstances.

It is difficult to understand, however, why Donald Wolin, the producer, didn't drop into the Alvin Theatre to see "Point of No Return" or, having done so, why he thought he was going to improve upon it.